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Embodied Learning: Towards new models for engaging with art within the university

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Introduction

This paper will outline the importance of embodied learning through case studies from two on-going cultural exchange programs within the context of the university sector. The authors make a position for multiple levels of educational engagement, which occur through these residencies and exchange programs: through studio engagement, exhibitions, and unexpected encounters outside of classrooms and timetabled lessons. In the current climate where Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are often touted as a general panacea for the transference of knowledge in universities, we present embodied learning as an essential cornerstone model to facilitate experiential learning. Our paper will draw out key understandings from the embodied mind thesis of Mark Johnson (2007) which makes a case for an 'aesthetics of human understanding' as the most important philosophy for the 21st century. If this is the case, then art schools become more important than ever as they are well placed to contribute to this realm of knowledge. We aim to illuminate the dynamic nature of this approach as an active engagement where the participants interact and engage in problem solving both individually and through group interaction. Furthermore, we emphasise that profound changes can occur as a result of such engagement, which may also offer seed potential for life-changing experiences. Therefore, we make a case for the art studio as a key nexus for universities where different cultures and groups can meet and engage through the process of making, to develop shared experience which extends cultural understandings beyond the limits of common language.

In order to outline our case, it will be first necessary to define the embodied mind thesis and what we mean by embodied learning. The authors will then make clear why Johnson, in the light of recent revelations about the study of the mind, considers aesthetics to be the most important philosophy for the 21st century. Finally, we will consider two case studies as flexible models for embodied learning.

Towards an Aesthetics of Human Understanding

In his book *The Meaning of the Body*, Johnson traces the trajectory of why art and aesthetics have been traditionally viewed as lesser forms of knowledge and identifies two main historical sources with Kant and Plato. For Plato, art was a form of *mimesis* imitating the real and it is for this reason that he banished imitative poetry from his ideal state for he interpreted it as being a second-rate derivative understanding of reality and not a direct presentation of reality (Johnson, p. 210). Kant for his part made an rigorous critique and found that art and what he called “aesthetic experience” are not primarily sources of knowledge; rather they are sources of a certain kind of refined, intellectual feeling. For Kant, ‘Nothing pertaining to taste can ever be the basis for universal concepts, propositions or knowledge’ (cited in Johnson p. 218). Key to this evaluation of aesthetics as holding a lower, secondary status in relation to knowledge is that it is considered to be a subjective personal experience, which will remain enclosed within the personal realm as ‘feelings’ and therefore cannot be conveyed successfully to others. Part of the aim of Johnson’s book is to overturn this view and to make the provocative claim that “insofar as aesthetics concerns the very conditions of meaningful experience and thought, philosophy must be grounded in aesthetics” (p. 213).

Mark Johnson (2007) draws on recent developments through cognitive science to develop his aesthetics of human understanding. Through these developments, he and others postulate that the mind and the body are not two separate entities; rather, they are one unified substance so that “the human mind is not contained within the body but emerges from and co-evolves with the body” (Johnson, p.279). This radical concept is a hammer blow to the still dominant paradigm of Cartesian dualism, which argues that the mind is separate from the body and thereby that humanity is separate from nature.

With the embodied mind thesis, the human mind is not only intimately entwined with the body. Importantly, the human subject cannot be understood without a connection to the environment. For Johnson, a human being is a “body-mind” which is an “organic continually evolving process of events” (p.279); it is intermeshed with the environment - the body-mind emerges from and continuously shapes the cultural, social and physical aspects of the environment that he or she inhabits. This process of active continual change and development begins within the womb and does not cease until the death of an individual. The desire to make meaning of one’s world is elemental to human life and is experienced at a preconscious level through the most

visceral primordial bodily means of sensation, feeling, emotions, image schemas and concepts. In this way, before we have spoken language we are shaping meaning in our world through experience, which is recorded and produced through bodily engagement.

Johnson therefore asserts that human meaning is embodied:

we begin our lives mostly by feeling or sensing this vast complex of meaning and we never cease to access it via feeling, even when we make use of culture's most remarkable tools of symbolic expression and interaction (p.279).

Everything for Johnson hinges on what Merleau-Ponty considered to be the 'porous' nature of the human body where information about the world seeps into the flesh and becomes part of the mind-body (1994, p 284) at preconscious levels – learning takes place like this continuously and we absorb information about our society, our environment and each other in complex multi-faceted ways. In recognising that embodied learning takes place in unconscious ways Johnson calls for an aesthetics of human understanding.

He says “ Aesthetics must include the study of everything that goes into the human capacity to make and express meaning” (p.x).

A study such as this would be all encompassing - it would be relational, involving complex on-going exchanges between individuals, cultural groups and communities and the environments they emerge from. Art is a pre-eminent model for pursuing such goals; however, the dominant narrative from mainstream media has for too long misrepresented art as being an indulgent luxury item. In our example, art takes its proper place as a tool for deeper understanding of the nature of being.

Applying the theory of embodied learning into practice relies on the principles of reciprocity: a collaborative and engaged process by which both parties can gain, and in some cases the gains can be life changing. Importantly, the following projects are not tied to assessment processes and are not part of any particular curriculum requirements.

Case Study One – Jimmy Pike Trust and Open Bite Australia

Open Bite Australia was established at Edith Cowan University in 1998 to facilitate and publish a range of printmaking projects by regional and international artists. The workshop fulfils a number of pedagogic, cross-cultural and creative research needs and offers students a unique opportunity to work in collaboration with internationally renowned artists and researchers.

With a focus on the relationship between arts education and its related cultural industries, the workshop has exposed a number of ethical, commercial and cultural issues that serve to frame our philosophy and broaden the parameters of our research and creative practices. From the Aboriginal arts perspective, the workshop attempts to offer an alternative relationship between artist and agent, particularly in response to cases of exploitation of Australian Aboriginal artists in the areas of reproduction and copyright.

In recent years, the workshop has focused on providing opportunities for upcoming Aboriginal artist to produce work in a supporting educational environment free of the restrictions of the traditional agent / artist relationship. Working with long-term prisoners or with young artists from remote communities has enabled Open Bite to establish a political and social position in terms of empowering artists within a set of constantly changing cultural values.

Hanna Fink and Hetti Perkins description of indigenous art probably comes closest to defining the indefinable: 'Aboriginal Art is a protean phenomenon, a way of introducing change to maintain continuity' (2005, p60).

Change and continuity is expressed in another sense: Jimmy Pike was an inaugural artist in residence at ECU through Open Bite in 1998 and he continues to collaborate with us through his enduring legacy. Not long before he died, Jimmy Pike and his wife Pat Lowe established the Trust with the aim of assisting young Aboriginal artists. Since 2010 this Trust has been awarding two annual scholarships to fund artists to work with staff and students at ECU in the Print Studios. The annual scholarship supports travel and accommodation for the artists while Open Bite contributes studio facilities and technical support for the period of the residency.

From an educational perspective, the collaborations enable embodied learning experiences for our own students and the artists which transcend normative associations of academic learning. All of this occurs as bodies move around the

studios, interacting in multi-modal ways. It has been a life-changing experience, for example, to witness cultural stories being related to staff and students as the prints are being pulled on the Albion and intaglio presses. During the inaugural 2010 residency of Edwin Lee Mulligan and his father Pampirla Boxer Hanson, Edwin imparted a story where, before his surprised audience, he transformed into the shape and soul of a bird and flew over his homeland relating in real time an aerial perspective of topology and landmasses to the significance of his paintings and dreamtime stories. Birds too featured in the work of Roseleen Park who arrived in the winter of 2011 saying that her deceased uncle had appeared to her in a dream and asked her to paint owls. She made a series of barely discernable linocuts of white owls printed on white paper, their shapes reflecting the light as images of the invisible (Uhlmann, 2011). We learnt that knowledge is passed down through doing from generation to generation and Francine Steele, a Fitzroy crossing artist from 2014, related how she learnt to paint from her father, Edgar Pike, by copying his maps directly onto canvas.

Often, however, the exchanges are non-verbal and knowledge of a subtle and imperceptible nature is imparted – such as when the artists Lorraine Daylight and Roseleen Park shared traditional practice of their ground earth pigments. What kind of knowledge is imparted, for example, when someone from a western culture feels the waxy fineness of the white ochre whilst learning that this has been sourced from the same ochre sites for the past thirty to forty thousand years and that during this time this colour has been written on the bodies of these peoples as meaningful dreamtime stories?

This two-way learning model offers opportunities to Aboriginal artists to work in printmaking as a primary art language whilst developing self-sustaining practices in order to manage and control their work within what has traditionally been a very disempowering commercial art market. On the other hand, the students at ECU are exposed to ancient and traditional narrative story telling and art production that serve to disrupt their perceptions of euro-centric culture, process and language.

Case Study Two – The Third Space

China and Australia share the common ground of having long traditions of cultural heritage through synchronic Indigenous cultures that have been maintained within growing diasporic societies. However, whereas modern Australia often denies its Aboriginal heritage, China is debating how to preserve and celebrate its long-

standing Indigenous traditions within its growing internationalised and hybridised communities. This, at least in the short term, has created a cultural collision, a notional space between cultures or what Homi Bhabha refers to as *the third space*. While Bhabha proposes a third space that is incommensurate within social and political contexts, this case study examines the counter theories by which productive and creative spaces are offered to artists and writers through intercultural collaboration, privileging expressive language to re-propose perceived barriers of cultural difference. Bhabha explains the third space in these terms:

The non-synchronous temporality of global and national cultures opens up a cultural space, a *third space* where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates a tension peculiar to borderline existences (1994).

This transformative space has been contested by such writers as Ien Ang, a Chinese-Australian theorist, in her comment on Felski's paper 'The Doxa of Difference' (Felski, 1995). In Ang's paper 'The Uses of Incommensurability' she discusses the meaning of identity and togetherness in the context of how we live together in the 21st century. Ien Ang points to the breakdown of cultural boundaries in an increasingly interconnected and interdependent globalised world, and suggests that the moments of incompatibility that occur between cultural groups play a major role in forming our new complex hybrid societies. For example, in her observation about language, often perceived as a barrier within this incompatible space, she suggests that a working space has been created where artists and collaborators might share fertile ground.

In addition to the role that miscommunication can play, the formation of cultural identity is perhaps more dependent on the present than on history. The book *Complex Entanglements: Art, Globalisation and Cultural Difference*, edited by Nikos Papastergiadis (2003), is an anthology of diverse positions on postcolonial theory. A central theme in Papastergiadis's text is that what we are is where we are *now*, rather than where we were *from*, suggesting that our cultural histories have little bearing on our current identity within a modern hybrid society. These oppositional notions of cultural space, both physical and philosophical, form the basis of several contemporary arts practices in Australia and China. However, the challenge of negotiating a future that is flavoured with the traditions of the past is one that seems to characterise Chinese artists and writers far more than the Australians. Edward Kus

suggests a provocative thesis on Chinese identity from the perspective of *othering* and, as such, touches on the central theme of third space. He states:

The West has played *some* role in shaping Chinese identity because of the role of the *other* that the West occupies in the Chinese psyche. An individual, group or society is most easily defined in terms of what it is not, and the Chinese-West division has traditionally served as an immutable dichotomy from which the Chinese could define from the project, their own conception of identity (2008 p101)

Using Bhabha's third space theory as a basis by which to examine both personal and national identities, the third space project was established between ECU and the University of Shanghai Science & Technology (USST) in 2013. A group of ten students from each institution were paired as collaborative partners to work on the production of new artworks that reflect a position between their respective cultures in order to test new languages that represent the notions of a positive and transitional third space. The idea of a *transitional* space pays homage to Hanna Fink and Hetti Perkins' description of Aboriginal culture, contesting the assumption that long-standing traditional culture is by default one that is fixed.

In the first instance, students were given a project brief supported by the underpinning theories and counter-theories along with examples of various forms of art that have attempted to bridge cultural polarity through collaborative practices. Students used a drop box site to share and images and as an archive of the project, along with a mobile group chat for real-time dialogue between the entire project group.

Third Space constructs a social space for creative communications and the Internet has a facilitating role in the collaborations. Due to the geographical dislocation of the participants, the Internet arguably acts as a mediated *third space* in Bhabha's sense – that is, a space of contestation. This *in-between* space is where the collaborators can exchange ideas, share visual work and ultimately build artworks together, in communication with each *other*. This is the philosophy of the *Third Space* exchange: to construct a creative context that encourages debate and collaborative interaction.

In the same way as sociologist Nick Couldry acknowledges Hannah Arendt's proposition that "sites are connected, through a multitude of links into a public space of shared significance and meaning", (cited in 2004, p12) we too wish to construct

collaborations that go beyond an uncritical exchange into a dynamic and critically reflexive space. This demands the adoption of a reflexive praxis that encourages respect, engages with ethics, and acknowledges difference. Foremost here, too, is the importance of embodied learning – encouraging a reflexive practice that attempts to interrogate visceral bodily unconscious understandings. What is learnt when first-hand experience overturns cultural preconceptions? How might the sensations of place – of a traditional Chinese garden for example – move from initial profound disorientation and foreignness towards deeper cultural engagement and understanding¹?

In order to address such profound questions, it was vital to the success of the project to orchestrate two return study tours to enable the students to work together and to share each other's physical and social environments. In addition, the two institutions shared major exhibitions in Shanghai and Perth involving over fifty artists working within the related themes of the creative process (*becoming*)² and inter-connected language (*translations of space*)³ to critically evaluate and materially manifest the projects main themes.

The ambitions and outcomes of the project extend much further than the production of new collaborative work. Through this project it has become clear that the notion of collaboration and embodiment within arts practice is *transferable*, suggesting that not just an informed, but also a *shared*, understanding of our identity can transcend the theoretical position of social and political conflict on which this project is built. In this respect, projects such as this can contribute to the seeding of new languages that might better reflect the positive aspects of our developing hybrid communities.

In conclusion, both case study examples of embodied learning enable reflexive comprehension of the importance of community engagement through focused projects that involve multimodal methods of working within art studios across diverse cultures. Only through real-life encounters with the *other* can cultural understandings deepen whilst simultaneously contributing to developing the importance of meaning making within an aesthetics of human understanding for the 21st century.

¹ Research questions such as these currently inform the MAVA practice-led research project of ECU student, Jane Whelan.

² *Becoming: process in creative work in relation to the lived environment*. Exhibition at the art gallery of the University of Shanghai Science and Technology 18th October – 4th November 2013.

³ *Translations of Space*. Exhibition at the Spectrum Project Space Edith Cowan University July 24th – August 1st 2014.

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Figure 1: Natural pigments of 2011 Jimmy Pike Trust Scholarship artists, Rosleen Park and Lorraine Daylight.



Figure 2: Francine Steele (front) and Jennifer Dickens (rear), the 2014 Jimmy Pike Scholarship holders, working in the Print studios at ECU, Perth.



Figure 3: Students from third space project in Shanghai 2013.



Figure 4: ECU Visual Arts and USST undergraduate students interact with Dora Griffiths, one of the Jimmy Pike Scholarship holders for 2012.



Figure 5: Professor Xu Shanxun gives a lecture to ECU staff and students and USST students during third space project in Shanghai in 2013.